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WITCH AND OTHER POEMS

by

Grace Hazard

Conkling

SHIP'S LOG

(1924)

FLYING FISH

(1926)

1929

New York

ALFRED · A · KNOPF

WITCH
AND OTHER POEMS

by
Grace Hazard
Conkling

1929
New York
ALFRED · A · KNOPF

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To my friend
Caroline Marmon Fesler

235421

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WITCH

WITCH

Instead of the nine ironic weathers
And the moon like thistledown to her hand,
The new moon sleek as a gull's breast-feathers,
A white gull on the sand,

She is given a winter fierce and brittle
With wheels of moon grinding over her head
And the sky not altered even a little
Whatever the meteor said.

Too cold for flying: the risk is greater.
Better no doubt to remain discreet
And think her thoughts of the wild equator
Safe in the frozen street.

But even as she dreamed herself demure,
Withdrawn into discretion, meek and chilly
As a forgotten apple in the hilly
Orchard of tarnished trees, she grew less sure
She could survive at all to breathe the pure
Negation of the stainless air: and heard
A bluejay utter some derisive word
In comment on her purposes obscure:
And saw him contradict the snow with blue,
Escaping argument on cynic wings.
It was then she flickered in the dusky room
Like a flame blown upon: it was then she knew
Her own identity among other things,
And stole the broomstick from the hearthside broom.

She is away, she is free, she is gone.
Behind her a smoking furrow of air
And a wrinkled light that is not of dawn.
There is nothing there

When the sun limps back through the iron trees.
No trail confesses she is away
To print the sky with her filigrees.
But can she stay?

How she got home, what use to ask?
She lost the dark like a velvet mask.
Seeing her, anyone would have known . . .
But she was a witch and lived alone.

And she put off her quicksilver grace
Like a drift of gossamer, and her face
Was still and her lovely hands were mute.
They might have fondled no rounded fruit,

Have found no honey hid by the swarm
Of wild-bee stars. Compact of storm,
She wore a gown the color of peace.
She might have worn spun snow like a fleece.

Now she has thrust at random into a jar
Smug hothouse flowers, plump rose and red carnation,
Because she will not yield to the temptation
To follow violets wherever they are
Since winter drove them from the northern valley.
They must be somewhere: but she dusts the hearth
With the broom of rushes, thinks about the earth
Like steel under the snow and tries to rally
Her desperate thoughts; keep them within four walls.
This is broad daylight. This is the morning after.
Whatever happens, she has chosen laughter.
The bell rings and her doubtful lover calls.

She has broken an icicle in two.
She has ruined an excellent spear
That might have pierced, have gone clean through
A moment not too clear.

The blue point withers against her hand.
She has blunted it with a touch.
He makes an effort to understand
Her loving fire so much,

But while he summons wit to pursue,
She has vanished anger and all.
What is an honest lover to do
Whom God made casual?

She hid away until he went.
(He never learned quite what she meant.)
The hours drew on by slow degrees.
Oh, the inertness of the trees,

Those cloudy trees about the house!
Their crystal pallor was not hers.
She wanted disobedient boughs
Refusing snow. She was perverse

About the crystal: let it be
Unsheathed, let all the colors run
Passionate with identity,
Hostile and turbulent with sun.

Her anger broke the elm tree's pose
Only between fierce thought and thought.
Then distance like a wind uprose
And brought the sea: till she forgot

The valley quilted in the cold,
Forgot she was the only one
Who dared pull stars about her ears
Like so much splintered glass, for fun,
Who dared unravel shreds of sun
And prove herself chameleon.

Merely the creature of a mood
Dependent on the tricks of light,
As though her wilful hunger could
Be quieted with malachite

Of shoal-water or indigo
Of the stark depths beyond the bar,
She laid the sea along the snow
And heaped for surf a powdered star

Like coral-dust made bright with wind.
This is not snow at all, said she,
But a shore of twisted tamarind
Against the silk of the striped sea.

And going down along the hot sea-rim
Where the palms made a crumpled dusk of mauve,
She found a pelican fishing in a cove
And stayed a little while to wade with him.
Beyond the midnight Gulf all leafy-dim
And hung with ripe stars like an orange-grove,
She turned away from Mexico to rove
Among the islands following her whim
As dolphins do who are neither wrong nor right.
For it was good to find the ruffled ships,
Hear names that burned to Spanish overnight,
And lose the north. She was too weary of
The diagram men made of careful love,
And had no patience with reluctant lips.

But back at dawn and out of the air
With nothing proved,
She would quiver with despair.
Still unloved,

She must contradict herself
And her desire.
Reason was the marble shelf
That held the fire.

She must be like wintry stone:
Like the cold hearth
That could rob flame of its own:
Like the cold earth
Even flame cannot burn.
Could she learn?

For days and nights she struggled to pretend
She had not known horizon and world's end,
Nor climbed alone an arc of sky to see
The foam of stars along infinity.

She chose the colorless: she chose negation.
The trees confirmed her choice without elation,
And the cold crouched all faithful at her door:
Until she could not bear it any more.

"Here is a pitiful thing at last," she cried:
"A thing that makes me wish I might have died.
I cannot learn to change, learn to forget
Color of life to the least violet,

Color of flame to the least spurt of blue.
To let it go is more than I can do.
I cannot guess the meaning of this place.
Let it be distance breaks me, let it be space!

And if rebellion be the uttermost sin,
The devil will not refuse to let me in."
She rushed to claim the magic of the broom,
But first she flung the fire about the room.

The valley did not see her go.
It glimmered in a trance of snow
Her crumbled house had smudged with black.
This time the witch would not come back.

She had attained a height undreamed
Up where the moody meteors streamed:
And knowing well she could not stay,
She felt her sorrow die away,

And shared an instant of that glory
Untamed, complete and transitory
So long surmised: and when it went
She fluttered downward having spent

All strength she had. She would not dare
Ever again to ride the air.
The stars went out along the sky.
The moon would fall down by and by.

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ENVOY

Now forget her ways
And how I found her
Through the white moon-haze
Trembling round her.

Forget all you heard.
She was not human.
She was a wild bird,
Not a woman.

Forget all the snares
Of her sweetness.
There is no one shares
Her completeness.

There is no one knows
Where she is faring.
No one to suppose
She is caring.

235421

STEAMER LETTER

When in the spires of waves the small bells ring
And are half smothered by the thrusting bow,
When your dark-coultered ship is the only plough
To turn a purple furrow for the spring,
When April is a seagull following
The twisted lanes of foam, not caring how
Green buds expect her in the orchards now,
You will be free as any living thing.
The wind's brief kiss should satisfy your mouth.
Oh, you will be contented I dare say!
And meanwhile since I must not love you south
I'll try to love a trifle north by east,
And keep the weather for my heart at least,
Invariable while you are away.

I'll feel the air blow chill to trouble me
As tanagers are troubled by the cold,
Just up from Mexico and all that gold
Poured down like daffodils upon the sea.
For I am warm now: I have memory
Of shining globes of surf forever rolled
Up a steep beach of tropic sand; I hold
The shell I found and hid away to be
Proof that we two were there; a seashell rosed
By some rich season underneath the wave.
You never knew I had it nor supposed
My love could dredge it up after the storm
Of one such furious breaker. I am warm
Possessing what you never knew you gave.

Now that I tell you, do you want it back?
Here in my hand I hold the fluted sea:
Here is the symbol of a tyranny
In wrinkled rose with lacquer of thin black.
Take my full meaning and you will not lack
Chords for the surf that crumbles, melody
Bright-scaled as netted mackerel, caught in three
Or four songs wilder than the moon's wild track
Across wind-broken water through the dark.
You know the shell is only a way of speech
For lapse of passionate breath, for the clear spark
Of rapture shared and lost, for the strange core
Of music heard that we shall hear no more
When we forget the breakers and the beach.

Think of me once or even twice with such
Mild flickering interest or half surmise,
I may elude that vagueness of your eyes,
Before they change and understand too much.
Miss me on Monday a little when you touch
The salt-scoured rail where the spray gleams and dries,
Or when you watch a herring-gull that flies
In the wave's hollow on its way to clutch
The elfin fish nobody ever sees;
It will be Thursday doubtless by that time.
Think of me shrewdly, certain it would tease
My mind as poems do to know the gull
So unaware that it is beautiful,
So unexplained by reason or by rhyme.

But if you see a porpoise leaping clear,
No matter when it is, oh, think of me!
Some other life that is what I shall be.
I'll cross with ships a hundred times a year,
I'll nudge the ribs of liners lifting sheer
As fabulous whales, yet hug my liberty,
And burrow with a snout of ebony
Under the swaying schooners and the queer
Rust-tarnished sulky tramps that stagger and roll,
Hearing the bow draw breath and the foam rustle,
Or whirl at evening from the sea's control
Into the light and dare the setting sun
To plunge and race with me and wallow in fun,
A thing of fluent bones and golden muscle.

More than these moments I must not demand.
Hours are another matter and your own.
I'll trust the busy sea to let you alone,
And London will not know it when you land.
It is too simple almost to understand
That you should go: for me the monotone
When music might have been: for you the drone
Of traffic down the pavement of the Strand.
You will be friends again with towers of bells
And horny pointing fingers of wise clocks
Among the smoke and tangled river-smells
Where Tilbury sprawls along the oily Thames
And ships have gone to sleep and tumult hems
Them in to dream the dark dream of the docks.

You are right to be so homesick for the towers,
And I am wrong to look too deep within.
This is the season when new things begin
And turf betrays the finger-prints of flowers.
Tell me, my dear, how to invest the hours.
What shall I see? The copper moon worn thin,
Or a taut ship strung like a violin?
Rain-gilded streets or poplars striped with showers?
Come with me . . . you must say . . . *come along with me,*
Down by St. Paul's in Paternoster Row
There is a little shop . . . What can it be?
Old books perhaps? Old prints? Nothing at all
Depending in the least upon St. Paul?
I'll have to ask the pigeons if they know.

Quickly before the broken wave falls down
Show me the world blown like a moth through space,
Yet share with me the drama of a place,
Let me not lose you, share with me the town . . .
Bridges and primrose-market and the frown
Where houses doubt the spring, and ruffled lace
Of April leaves, their shadows on your face . . .
Quickly before the falling wave can drown
All leaves and flowers and every day and night
We two have known and music and the pang
When music stops. I need to be concrete
Even with illusion, need to invent delight:
And liked the blackbird first because he sang
The number on a door in Cockspur Street.

I wish that you had taught me how to spend
My tropic colors for one subtle gray
To match the dove's in iridescent play
Of rainy light on pearl and light's soft end.
I must disguise myself: I must pretend
The north prevails at last and has its way.
My very songs whatever I may say
Will seem not to remember you, my friend.
Since I have been alone my whole life long,
It should be easier to let you go
Out of my sight and put you in a song.
But how reveal the secret of your brow
Or those grave eyes that find me even now?
And if they do, I need not tell you so.

Some instant aspect of an immortal thing
I'll give you since you do not want the whole.
The live will in the flesh, the pulsing soul
Is mutable past all imagining.
It shines and goes: it is the irised wing
Of the flying fish: it is the quivering bowl
Of the sea-anemone, or the aureole
Of a pearl, or the coral's alabaster spring
Faintly unfurled in leaf on fretted leaf.
It is all and none of these forever the same
And flawed with change forever. Though it be
Mingled a little with the salt of grief
From those deep waters out of which we came,
We were lovers long before there was a sea.

POEMS OF PORTO RICO

UTUADO TRAIL

A THATCHED hut on a mountain spur
Held like a crystal the bright coast
And poised sea, burning lonelier
Than Aldebaran, almost.

What wind there was contrived to pour
A liquid sunlight to dilute
Rainbows along the valley floor;
And stain the cheeks of fruit.

It took the sugarcane to bring
The sea to terms. If I had been
As sure of any passionate thing
As cane-fields of their green,

I should have had my way by now
Even with words: and I could say
Just what I saw, convince you how
A mountain hut that day

Possessed the far Atlantic shore,
Let it illumine a bare room,
Wore it as simply as it wore
Wild hibiscus bloom.

PLOUGHING THE CANE FIELDS —VILLA ALBA

The dark ridge, then the crumbled hill, then a cone
The whole sky rests on, then the sun in a veil:
And up the tilted world there goes a trail
Of satin furrow like a monotone
Of 'cellos ploughing brown fields of their own.
Rain stands and sings. A palm tree glimmers pale
Marking the turn. The oxen will not fail
To travel straight. They know the way alone.
But they must like the boys who chant all day
Between their bowed heads, riding on the yoke,
One to each pair, six oxen to a plough.
I heard round voices cry and tremble away
In minor thirds because the trade-wind spoke
Sobbing under its breath, the earth knows how.

JAYUYA SHOWER

When mangoes fall, it's into the river;
But coconuts tumble into the road.
Rain makes the cane-fields wince and quiver.
A cloud dissolved is a heavy load.

It drives the kid to the bronzed goat-mother,
It turns her back to the trees again.
Here's ripe rain not like any other:
It tastes of fruit. It is wine of rain.

At last a cloud from the sea has made you
Curl a banana leaf over your head
As though its whim had been to persuade you.
It wasn't going to rain, you said.

GUAYAMA SEINE

I saw them pull the colors out of the sea.
From the great seine the water fell away
And left the blue with mother-of-pearl inlay,
The winnowed silver and the two or three
Lavender jellies. Pablo handed me
A slender shape, a sort of Culprit Fay
In drooping gossamer. Somehow gone astray,
The sword he wore had failed to set him free . . .
That two-inch blade tipped with vermilion! . . .
I came too late. His valor was all spent,
And now he had to die of air and sun,
While I must face futility again
Staring across a diamond silence when
I asked the Caribbean what it meant.

RECUERDO

In Ponce I remembered
The slow curve of the sea.
I saw your ship through flowers
Of the flamboyant tree.

I saw your eyes in shadow
Morning could not erase.
I thought of you in Ponce,
That sun-bewildered place!

Knowing that you would want me
Always a little less,
I warned my heart against you
With no bitterness.

TREES OF SPRAY

I sat there a long time,
Snug on the cliff's knees,
Watching the spray grow tall
And bloom like trees.

You could not have said a word
If you had been there.
The silver-flaked sea-voice
Possessed the air.

I could not have heard you call me
Though you had shouted my name.
I kept on thinking I heard it
Just the same.

I caught through the white clamor
Words you meant to say,
And lost them again among glittering
Trees of spray.

DESERT ISLAND

There is one island like a sleepy rose.
The waves have worn it down and left no scars.
You might confuse it with the thick drowned stars
So clear the shore, so white the surf that snows.
Nobody lives there. Only the gull goes
Cruising along the wind above the bars
Of mirror-sand his pale reflection mars
In passing. But it's little the gull knows
Of such a place, and I know less than he.
The heel of a hurricane could soon erase
This beauty and submerge it in the sea.
I saw it from the ship and shall not cease
To think of its sphered calm, its remote peace,
And how it made me crave your stormy face.

LA ARGENTINA DANCES

Improvisation—*Cielo de Cuba*
  She dances the Island-Shore
  She dances the Island-City
Fire Dance from *El Amor Brujo*
Andaluza
Valenciana
La Corrida—Plaza de Toros—Madrid

IMPROVISATION—CIELO DE CUBA

She dances the Island-Shore

Now the white peacock screams in the sea-foam
And the whole island trembles. Now he trails
Feathers of seed-pearl ruffling up the sand
Where waves curl home,
And screams again till all the frightened sails
Run away, run away on the wind from that arc of sea,
And the blue air of morning curdles, pales
To froth, falls in great gold flakes breathlessly.
Gulls veer away and
Their crying with them, while his anger makes
The shore an empty corridor to pace
Slowly, with arrogance, over fallen flakes
Drifted like gold snow, over glittering shards
Of coral rubbish, over purple shells
Grape-clustered where the seaweed scrawls a vine.
He trails a wrath of foam in scrolled design
Of irised moons by mortal never seen,
The sinister lure of a forsaken place
Incarnate in a creature out of dream.
Hear the white peacock scream!
And afterwards
The surf throbs faster: under the shoal-green
Water the little fish run away, run away
Out of that arc of sea: for nowhere else
Is any live thing left to take fright and go.
Oh furious breast, oh wonder written slow
On the sea-margin, mother-of-pearl inlay

Set deep in the grooved brain lest it forget
That furled fan dragging pearls, that lunar threat
Humbling the tides along a desolate shore,
I know I shall lose you in an instant more,
Though the remote blood hear you screaming yet:
Angry with whom? Wherefore?
And what is this beauty from which words run away?

She dances the Island-City

Not the bright *plazas* nor the heaped hotels:
Rather, the Old Town with one foot in the sea,
Its plaster houses color-washed like shells.
  (*Audora* lives in the shell of apricot yellow.
   Maria sleeps under a tree.)
You dance the winding of the coral lane.
Brown *Juana* passes . . . cheeks powdered with
      chalk . . .
Flower in her hair again . . .
With *Manuel,* a devil of a fellow,
Twanging an inconsequent guitar.
They lilt and glitter . . . Bubbles on champagne
Are longer-lived than they,
You seem to say:
And further down where the small rabble are,
Under a cloud of shrill cries, tangled laughter,
As when gulls disagree,
You dance in patterns of *Charleston* and *Cake-Walk,*
And the little mimics come tip-tilting after
Shining like chocolate. The sun will melt them soon.
  (*Why did you twist your kerchief blue as sky*
   Into a turban with long rabbit-ears
   Like question-marks of silk? But I know why.
   To hear the secrets that a rabbit hears
   Is to learn and know what others merely suppose
   And later on deny.)
Now old *Maria* under the blazing noon
Puts down her basket of mangoes gone too mellow,
And *Juana* throws away the over-ripe rose.
Can there be comedy with no hint of tears?

FIRE DANCE

From *El Amor Brujo* (De Falla)

(Ritual dance for driving away evil spirits)

As of *Toledo*

LIKE a scarf of sun you have unwound
The river-valley, flung it down
Along a landscape scored and browned
With rusty gold: and you have found
The stubborn cliff, the isolate town
Within its sphere of tawny air
Whirled at a speed that holds it still,
Spinning upon your central will,
A rigid dream, a poised despair,
A plastic fixity with no sound,
The whole sky concentrated there
And you the burning-glass: until
Under your feet the very ground
Is fused, the sand grains melt and spill
Crystal . . .
Somnambulent around
Your body hard and columnar
That must resist the tremor of blood,
The mountains swirl like smoke. You are
Withheld, you vanish. Where you stood
Is darkness shaken by no star.

VALENCIANA

You have the air of offering pomegranates
And dates from *Elche* and big moon-green grapes.
A melon falls and breaks upon the stones . . .
No matter . . . and a smoky wine escapes
From a tipped goatskin. *Malaga* or *Jeréz*
Would drip such bitter sweetness to compete
With the spiced sea-wind leaning from the coast
To snare into an idyll your wild feet.
They might be foam, they dazzle and are bright
So swiftly: but you are not out of the sea.
From gardens, rather, hot with oranges,
And tarnished thickets of parched mulberry.
There is a tracery of olive leaves
Among the fruits and flowers of your shawl:
Gray leaves that make me wonder when you go
If you were ever really there at all.

ANDALUZA

The lashed silk wraps you in raw gold:
Your shoulders flexed, your subtle hips
Swaying to rhythms that were old
When first Columbus begged for ships.

Old as the mountains: flowing forth
From dark to bright as your arms flow
Upward like swallows darting north,
Downward like their swerved wings that know

When on the instant to wheel south.
Against the purring castanets
Is set the secret of your mouth,
A crafty scarlet that forgets.

Your gypsy heels beat fierce tattoo:
An arabesque of sudden pain.
Vehement, glowing, who are you?
What is the meaning of this Spain?

Your skirt flares tense with intricate turning
And gay tormented sequins clink.
You give us only time for learning
To feel, to suffer . . . not to think.

LA CORRIDA—PLAZA DE TOROS — MADRID

THE stripped arena deep in sun . . .
Was stillness ever half so still? . . .
Where thirty thousand are made one
Passionate focused human will!

You are that passion. There will plunge
Bewildered, drowning in the glare,
Dark rage to meet you. There will lunge
Against your light a dark despair.

The *Plaza's* looming shadow steals
Across the sand. The ritual flame
That is your body, wavers . . . reels
Unsteady . . . straightens to the same

Hypnotic pose. Oh diamond-thrust
Of flame and of the flame-like sword,
You dance the drama of the dust:
Of death, the hated and adored!

The stains are blurred along the sand,
And now the emptied *Plaza* broods
In dusk where . . . almost lost . . . you stand:
For even death has many moods.

POEMS OF MALLORCA

THE WORD

When I went over the trail among the rocks
Blue crocus flowers in pity opened their eyes:
But the amber stare of the sheep was hard and wise.
They passed me splashed with color of the red fox . . .
Juan's way of telling the world they belong to
    him . . .
All cinnamon-red and rust of red fox fur.
Why did the creatures make me lonelier?
They stared and passed me, climbing the canyon-rim,
And Juan had splashed the paint on their woolly tails.
I forgot the crocus flowers, I forgot the sea,
Trying to find a word that would mean to me
That color of rusty heather: of Spanish sails.

Formentor

TREE FOR MUSIC

The loveliest thing I saw for a while
  Was a tree that grew in Spain.
It laid its leaves against a wall
  Of cream-and-honey stain.

A wall remembering only sun
  That made the tree at home:
Its long leaves had each a long shadow
  Yellow as honeycomb.

All heavily from wiry wands
  Three pomegranates hung,
And they were ripe for any legend
  Waiting still unsung.

Somewhere there will be music yet
  For the pomegranate tree:
Each leaf rhyming with a shadow
  And the round fruits three

Of bronze thinned to a tawny flush
  Where the bright juice shows through:
Music dilated with full light
  And dark with wonder too,

That, when the wild bird comes to rest
  Between the leaf and fruit,
Will deepen till the sound comes flowing
  Up from the tree's root.

MOUNTAINS

Mountains are good to look upon
But do not look too long.
They are made of granite. They will break your heart,
They will break your song.

The thing to look upon is water
Where the currents change.
It is like you: it has a mournful beauty
Wandering and strange.

From the west it rolls a darkness under
And thick stars from the south.
If you hunger, there are stars drowned in deep water
Enough for your mouth.

SALAMANDER

Out of the dark you came
Into the fire's pool,
Ringed about with flame,
Golden, slim and cool.

I can see you there.
Sinuous and free
You elude despair:
That is left for me.

Burning, never burned,
Loving without love,
It is from you I learned
What I am dying of.

MONASTERY OF HOLY MARY

Climbing above the olive trees
We met a brown monk coming down,
And he had stuck some heather in
His girded gown.

"They would not hear you ring," he said,
"The gate is open. Just go through,
And if you like the flowers there,
Gather a few."

The hilltop monastery shone,
A honeycomb of golden air.
It was so still there seemed to be
No one there.

Not to awake the sleeping rose,
We crossed the garden silently
And found an alcove full of sun,
Facing the sea.

There were three walls of tile. The fourth
Was the blue water's depth and height:
And there were poems everywhere
I could not write.

Go make them for me looking where
Africa lies below the south.
Translate the Spanish of that bell
With silver mouth.

Write of the honey-colored walls
Crumbling about the garden close:
Write of the peace, not leaving out
The rose.

Nuestra Señora de Lluch—Mallorca

NOVEMBER HURRICANE

Rose-ochre, not quite brown
Flood-water rushes down
Gilded with oranges
Shaken from wading trees.

Caught in a dance they whirl
One with the stream to swirl
Through the flood-deepened breach
Of shell-and-pebble beach.

Now in the harbor lost
Bright oranges are tossed.
Meant for the children's lips
They drown among the ships.

Hundreds are swept away
Into the curdled gray
Of depths opaque and salt.
Was it the wind's fault,

Or the fruit-pelting rain's,
Or the sea's? But none complains
Of ravage such as this,
Knowing what the sea is.

ALMOND ORCHARDS

It was not the month. I did not see
The valley floored with almond bloom.
A sleek wind ran from tree to tree,
No feathers ruffled, plenty of room

For wings of wind to sweep clear through
Nor feel the touch of any bough.
The rush and swirl of feathered blue
Was all. It must be different now.

Behind my eyes and here at home
Those thickened boughs are mauve and white.
Oh island orchards, wearing foam
The sea has lent you overnight!

RECORDS

JADE KEEPSAKE

WHAT Chinese artist wanting a new charm
Enticed this cynic from a bit of jade,
Wondering was it God that he had made
With long green beard and draped mysterious arm?
Maybe he knew it later, saved from harm
Because he knew. Maybe he was betrayed
By his own dream: but I am not afraid.
This image, this derision shall grow warm
Against my heart since you have hid it there,
A promise or a threat . . . what use to ask?
You got it once in Münich, the rag-fair
I think you said, but any other place
Would mean as little to that scornful face,
Neither the tragic nor the comic mask.

Aware of and contented with extremes,
He has not changed expression though he knows
The other thing you gave me was a rose.
Having outlived so many mortal dreams,
Absorbed such light of wisdom cold as streams
Out of the arctic moon, what matter those
Petals of velvet more than wind that blows
Or dark that covers them? The moon still gleams.
A rose you gave me: (oh, the rose was red,
Deeper than pomegranates and their brilliant seed,)
And God in jade, a turban on his head.
But as you told me, I must have a chain
To wear this safely. When you come again,
Do not forget. A chain is what I need.

A STUDY OF FIRE

The wildcat Montezuma fed
  With human hearts was fanged like this:
Impatient of the awkward dead,
  And the slow god's analysis,

Brooding above his altar stone
  As though blood could not satisfy:
For the beast understands its own
  Hunger and thirst. Never ask why

Of that down-thrusting onyx head,
  Those hot jaws certain that they know!
. . . The god deliberates instead.
His brazen thoughts are slow.

THE WAY YOU TALK

Your way of saying things is strange.
Your fluent phrases twist and change
As wind-bewildered waters do:
And half is false and half is true.

How shall I find out what you mean
With true and false to choose between?
Or how remember to be wise,
Hating your truth, loving your lies?

SEAFARING MOON

It is the moon forbids me to forget.
It is the stubborn, the seafaring moon,
A windy hull with standing canvas set.
Chanteymen keep her silver nerves in tune,
Cloud-shadows scrawl her decks with violet,
Stars catch among her rigging. Very soon
She'll dip and vanish. I shall feel her yet
Trampling the servile tides that fawn and croon,
Wanting her freedom as I want my own.
You gray gulls storming from the river-mouth
On the whirled mist, go with her! You alone
Can follow after crying your wild cries.
She is Greek, I think, a ship with painted eyes.
When I last saw her they were looking south.

HAYDN—*OPUS 77*—NO. I

(To Hilda)

There is a little headlong tune of Haydn,
(Flying fish dipping to the blue wave!)
A daylight tune of Haydn that does not belong
To the trailing plume of a comet
Down a black velvet sky.
It has too brief a flight
For passion of a plunging star:
It is too frail
For glory.

That is why I wondered when it came hurrying,
When it came following the comet's mighty road
Like a familiar spirit.
There is no reason in this.
Haydn would laugh.
The goldfinch could as well put into song
The Gulf of Mexico he has to cross
To follow summer up from Yucatan.
But when I hear that melody
Tossed back from violin to waiting 'cello,
I see from a Mexican hilltop
As once I saw,
A plume of trailing light, a core of wonder
Up the dark zenith,
Turn planets into harebells faintly blue,
And the moon to a tarnished coin.

ONE KIND OF FAREWELL

You need not fear me so!
  I do not want the hour
  Of your pride's chiseled flower
Smooth and still as snow.

I only want to know
  From what root it came?
  Give it the old name
Before I go.

PORTRAIT AFTER WATTEAU

Your gilded apricot brocade
  Illumines gardens of late fall.
Lady, what exquisite parade
Is this? Whom would your voice persuade?
  Who might follow if you should call?

You wear a fine, a foamy lace.
  A fluted ruff makes use of pearls
To soften your disdainful face.
  Surrounded by a wreath of girls,
You puzzle and enchant the place.

(*Here tambourines are shaken.*)

They cannot cure you of disdain.
  Whatever madrigal they sing
Is woven with your thoughts in vain.
  So dark a dream no vibrant string
  Can change for all its murmuring.

Is it because you cannot find
  In the old gardens anywhere
Fastidious love tuned to your mind?
  And so Watteau must leave you there,
  As though a rose should know despair!

(*Here the harp has a cadenza.*)

DANCE-MOTIF FOR A MASQUE

(With a Farewell to be Said or Sung)

Down the wind's melodic curve
  You girls with hair flying,
Buoyant as with silken sails,
  Why are you crying
    Farewell you Spanish ladies?

And hurry, lads! there beckons Spain,
  Drifting and delaying!
Must you lose them all again?
  Must you still be saying
    Farewell you Spanish ladies?

One who lures you on with lace
  Over a bare shoulder,
Lovely, sullen, touched with race,
  Purple eyes that smoulder . . .
    Farewell you Spanish ladies.

One more like a mountain-girl,
  Dusk and tan and gold,
Kerchief fastened with a thorn,
  Barefoot, thistle-bold . . .
    Farewell you Spanish ladies.

You will never see them more.
  Soon they will be gone!
And that other laughing one
  With the corals on . . .
    Farewell you Spanish ladies.

Follow them though it be vain!
  With no voice replying
Cup your hands and call again,
  While the wind goes sighing
    Farewell you Spanish ladies.

THE WORD NOT SPOKEN

The single word you did not say
Made a dark secret of the day.
Your silence shaped that word in air:
A five-point star it glittered there.
It was not kindness held it so
Poised, and as I turned to go
I saw it threaten me before
It flashed down like a meteor.

MORNING SONNET

LISTEN to me, listen to me my dear!
The pool is full of gilded willow trees,
And wears an agate frog with freckled knees,
And holds a birch-wand like a tapered spear
Of whittled ivory. This water clear
Would float the sky if it were not for these
Thick boughs of silk, these frills and filigrees
Young April has embroidered on the year.
Somewhere a bird repeats an obvious thing,
Having the courage of sincerity.
Nobody ever taught him how to sing,
But since sun-up he has not ceased to strike
His sleighbell syllables all tuned alike:
Listen to me . . . to me . . . listen to me . . .

RECORD

THIS was a good day. Suddenly there was a blue heron
Flying low up the creek
Trailing dusk, trailing a soft slow shadowiness
Like folds of gauze in its beak.

And after dusk from the car on the mountain road
I saw a deer
That froze to bronze in the circle of pouring light,
So legendary, so near,

I could believe and not believe I saw it
All in the same breath:
Just as my body intends to go on living
And my brain reckons with death.

Wildness flowed over me like cold brook-water.
Don't be afraid, don't tremble, don't go away . . .
Then, gone! Well, whatever happens tomorrow,
This was a good day.

THE WITCH IN THE FOREST

THE WITCH IN THE FOREST

For the spider studying the sky,
Maker of almanacs,
The trussed delicious fly
And the house with no tax.

For the witch with the spinning brain,
Weary of reckoning time,
Her timeless dreams again
And words with no rhyme.

They borrowed the forester's hut,
But neither dwelt therein:
And both did little but
Sit and spin.

One by geometry
Divided false from true.
The other could not see
That point of view,

But snared the singing light
Like a strange bird in the strands
Of her bright hair and all night
Held it hid in her hands.

Solitary she would laugh like nobody's daughter
Lost in dim eternities of fern,
Sharing the laughter of the brown brook-water,
Nobody's love with nothing at all to learn.
For life had always been an Indian giver
She told the trees. Finding them taciturn,
She told the fire instead. They made her shiver.
It was the business of fire to burn.
Juniper-twigs she found to make it heed her,
And feathery hemlock-rubbish bleached and dried.
She brought it blue wax-berries from the cedar,
And peat-like humus from the mountain-side.
Daylong she searched for fuels whose strange meaning
The fire would translate in undertones,
And when the coals were ripe and no flame leaning,
She cooked her supper on three blackened stones.
And what she ate would be a commentary
On her far wandering as like as not:
Pungent-fleshed roots and wild fruit she would carry
To stew with mushrooms in her iron pot.
And there were filmy thoughts for spinning after:
Up and down she wove them, back and forth . . .
The spider watched her from his diamond rafter
Tipped like Orion's a little east of north.

You are not more
Precise, *said she,*
Than the star-sure
Anemone

A dawn or dusk-hour
Wind can sway.
Your cobweb flower
Will not give way:

Mere filigree
Without a stem:
A theory
All diadem.

I honor your spinning
You are my friend.
But where is beginning
And where end?

This doubt of mine
Will yet unscrew
Your orbits fine,
Rigid with dew!

So she would argue with him, so persuade
Her own heart, so refuse to be a ghost
Wavering before him, vague and shaken and lost:
But all in vain, for any sign he made.
She hated the cold arrogance of the dead,
Their soundless faces: a legend herself, almost,
A little outside life from her first breath,
She clutched at living. Every word she said
Was chosen to offend eavesdropping death.
Nights with the black trees, she would listen to them,
Hear what they could not say, those thoughts they had
Or made her have, which came to the same thing.
And sometimes she heard them growing,
Pulling their rings of strength out of the ground,
Sound coming and going
But like no other sound: no throaty gold
Humming within the upthrusting shaft,
No rustle of sap flowing,
No singing underground.
When the air laughed
Resisting, forever piling up crystal bars,
Somewhere there was sound
To overhear: a gust of darkness blowing
Between the trees and the stars.

The stars were like gold butter on new bread.
She saw them creamy-rich and thickly spread.
The spruces took great bites: they scalloped out
Mouthfuls of glitter, standing still about
The clearing like old men in long Chinese
Coats of inscrutable silk. She embroidered these
Herself with hanging fruit: and fireflies came
In quick design against the jet-dark flame
Of all that silence. What they might have told,
Those mandarin trees, for they were very old,
She tried in vain to think, imagining some
Poem, some passion, laying on their dumb
Lips the warm wisdom of an afterglow,
But from what vanished sun she did not know.
Like sorcerers along a paneled screen,
Star-nourished, powerful, they stood between
Her and the universe. They made her heart
Toll like a muffled bell: but her brain's art
Defied them, folding silk about their knees,
Deepening the folds with purple mulberries
And cracked pomegranates spilling seeds of heat.
Oh, there was plenty of fruit, but not to eat,
There with the witch among the midnight trees!

Doubt lived in her unanswered eyes.
Only the mumbling fire was wise,
Disdaining clock and calendar,
Morning-star and evening-star,

Not caring what was written on
The glacial mirror of the dawn,
Gorging itself with its own moon
Of wrinkled gold and gold-maroon.

She punished it, for why be proud?
The smoke went up and made a cloud
And scared away the chickadees,
And improvised a Parthenon-frieze.

She could not tell under that sky
If the wind meant to laugh or cry.
And the trees went on being old:
And the fire gnawed and mumbled gold.

She talked with leaves of nothing they could know
There on the mountain where a cloud would blow
Up the ravine, making the trees grow tall
Against their will, until the mist was all
Aware of the place, hooding the very fire
That hissed to hold it back. She did not tire
Of the fire's anger, furious to survive
Against all odds, demanding and alive,
Sucking the marrow of the resinous wood.
That hunger was a thing she understood
And knew that she could never satisfy
But wanted to have near her: heaping dry
Tinder of underbrush and bubbling cones
And boughs of spruce that burned even when wet,
Keeping the creature in its lair with stones.
Sometimes from wandering prodigious roads
Coiled in the wood like incandescent wire,
It stumbled to a weariness of ash,
And while it almost slept, her heavy eyes
Would watch the stars lay down their silver loads
Softly. So she would drowse, forgetting fire,
And bats would slice the dark with little cries.
But space, illogical with meteor-flash
Or tines of lightning sharply thrust to prod
The forest-depths, would startle her awake:
Or the moon glowing like the eye of God
If God were tolerant enough to make
Any concession for a witch's sake
Or pierce the humor of her thin disguise.

Beyond her door
The credulous air
Believed strange colors.
Was nothing there

But a cloud, but a wind
With a scarlet lash
For the clotted berries
Of the mountain-ash?

Was nothing over
The forest but rain
That treads down stillness
And goes again?

That day she saw
A shower whole,
Except for the meaning,
Except for the soul:

Beauty perverse
And fugitive . . .
Water held
In a witch's sieve.

Pure coincidences, sharp, salt-strong,
Were days she was possessed by the sea.
When the ravine cloud stayed so long,
She never doubted waves must be
Veiled in that fog: not spruce and fir.
The emerald on her wrist that shone
Conjured sea-bottoms up to her
With shells to lay her hands upon.
Sponges dilated with the wine
That country found a matter of course:
And was the young fern's quaint design
A frond uncurled or a seahorse?
Her dreams submerged the blossomed laurel
And she was the foam over the coral.

She lived there alone
A year and a day.
An orchid hunter
Who passed that way

Remembered long
Her hostile stare . . .
The tossed light on
Her sorrel hair

That leapt like flame
About her head.
Her feet were shod
(Or so he said,)

In moccasin flowers:
But nobody heard
From the man who saw her
One sensible word,

So nobody listened.
The day she was gone
The spruces glistened,
The clearing shone,

And the spider, up
At the crack of dawn,
Finished another
Pentagon.

A NOTE ON THE TYPE IN WHICH THIS BOOK IS SET

This book is set (on the Linotype) in Elzevir No. 3, a French Old Style. For the modern revival of this excellent face we are indebted to Gustave Mayeur of Paris, who reproduced it in 1878, basing his designs, he says, on types used in a book which was printed by the Elzevirs at Leyden in 1634. Although the Elzevirs were not themselves type founders, they utilized the services of the best type designers of their time, notably Van Dijk, Garamont, and Sanlecque. Many of their books were small, or, as we should say now, "pocket" editions, of the classics, and for these volumes they developed a type face which is open and readable but relatively narrow in body, although in no sense condensed.

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